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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [KPAO](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MIXED REVIEWS ON MOROCCO'S LEVEL OF RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM

Classified By: CDA Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A range of government, religious, and education leaders told EmbOffs and visiting DRL/IRF officer that while tolerance is broadly observed in practice, some problem remain. Government forbearance for perhaps 150 foreign Christian missionaries was being stretched, they said, as proselytizing was not formally legal and not socially acceptable to the vast majority of Moroccans, who are Muslim. They believed there was freedom of religion for foreigners in Morocco, but there no freedom of religion for Moroccans, who officially are assumed to be Muslim or Jewish. Converts to Christianity and their Christian church advocates were able to function but desired official legitimacy. The Jewish community wanted the government to educate other Moroccans about its existence. Government officials desired recognition and support for Morocco's relatively high degree of religious tolerance. End summary.

Converts Growing In Number

¶2. (C) Office of International Religious Freedom (DRL/IRF) Foreign Affairs Officer Warren Cofsky visited Morocco in late 2008 and, together with Poloff and other mission staff, met with a range of government, religious and education leaders involved in religious freedom issues. Reverend Jack Wald, Pastor of the Protestant Rabat International Church (RIC) since 2000, estimated to PolOff and Cofsky that there are between 3,000 and 4,000 Moroccan Christians who attend "home" church services every week and many more who have had a personal Christian conversion experience. He observed that most of these Moroccan Christians do not feel secure worshipping publicly and fear societal harassment. According to Wald, 99 percent of Moroccan families do not accept an individual's decision to convert from Islam to another faith. "To be Moroccan is to be Muslim," Wald said. He estimated that 90 percent of the Moroccan Christian population converted to Christianity from Islam as a result of local Moroccan Christians sharing their faith and viewing Christian television broadcasts via satellite. Only 10 percent, he believes, converted as a result of foreign missionary activity.

Claims of Persecution against Convert Christians

¶3. (C/NF) Cofsky and PolOff also met with local Moroccan Christian leaders Abdelaal Boualou and Yassine Sghiouiri El Idrissi who shared how frustrating it was to see the GOM officially recognize the Moroccan Jewish community and yet refuse to recognize the Moroccan Christian community, now in its third generation. They reported that they have been

trying for the past 10 years to register their Christian social development association with the government as an official non-governmental organization (NGO); however, their application has been repeatedly denied. Government officials did not explicitly say it, but the group felt the reason for their denial was that they were a Christian group.

¶4. (C/NF) Boualou and Idrissi reported that the Moroccan laws that forbade them from sharing their Christian faith with others were not strictly enforced. However, they also asserted that it was impossible for Moroccan Christians to attend regular church services publicly and that they felt as if they were always being followed by agents of the Moroccan security services. The converts stated that the rejection they experienced came mostly from family and friends and only secondarily from government officials, although they were aware that some Members of Parliament have publicly stated that Christian evangelism is a threat to Morocco's national security.

¶5. (C/NF) The two also described other examples of Christian persecution in Morocco such as refusals to rent villas for Christian-themed retreats in Ifrane, having their backpacks searched randomly by unidentified agents, having passports confiscated by the government, experiencing extensive delays or refusals to renew passports, and not being allowed to choose Christian names for their children. (Note: Berbers have also protested the restricted list of names, essentially from Arabic, but it is not universally enforced. End note.)

Moroccan Christians Becoming Bolder

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¶6. (C) Pastor Wald opined that the local church was becoming more aggressive. Wald felt that there was a movement among some Moroccan Christians to become more open in their activities and force the government to take action against them, thus emboldening them to persevere and strengthen their faith.

¶7. (C/NF) Boualou, once a member of the Moroccan gendarmerie and now manager of a local media company, recounted the story of when he approached Party of Justice and Development (PJD) leader Abdelillah Benkirane on the occasion of winning his party's leadership nomination in July 2008. Immediately following his acceptance speech, Boualou approached Benkirane explaining that he was a Christian and that he was praying for him. Initially surprised, Benkirane looked Boualou directly in the eyes and responded, "May God lead us all to the right path." The PJD is Morocco's Islamist-leaning political party.

Official Evangelical Church Asks for
Legislation to Legitimize Converts

¶8. (C) Rev. Jean Luc Blanc, head of the Council of Christian Churches in Morocco, related that the Council began religious freedom discussions with King Mohammed VI in 2000 out of a desire to regularize the status of Moroccan converts to Christianity who attend church. "We have Moroccans who worship with us who we don't want to hide," Rev. Blanc declared. Rev. Blanc stated that during his eight years in Morocco, he had not witnessed police action against such converts, who "do not actively evangelize but who respond if asked about Christianity." Rev. Blanc said that the Council had sought a "statute for Christians" and in that regard met with Ahmed Toufiq, Minister of Endowments (Habous) and Islamic Affairs, and Ahmed Abaddi, former official at the Ministry and current Secretary General of the Association of Ulemas (religious scholars). Rev. Blanc said that Abaddi informed him in the summer of 2008 that no progress had been

achieved.

Religious Freedom in Morocco: A Catholic Perspective

¶9. (C) Monsignor Vincent Landen was born in Meknes, Morocco, and has served as the Catholic Archbishop of Morocco for the past eight years. Meeting with Cofsky and PolOff in his Rabat office, the Archbishop said that there certainly was freedom of religion for foreigners in Morocco but no freedom of religion for the Moroccan citizen who was obligated to be Muslim. Monsignor Landen claimed that Moroccans were prohibited from regularly attending mass and catechism classes but they were allowed to attend Easter and Christmas Mass as long as they were the invited guests of expatriate Catholic friends. Television programs via satellite served as the only means for local Moroccan Catholics to receive Catholic instruction. According to the Monsignor, if a Moroccan decided to convert to Catholicism, s/he was considered "dead" by the family and was obligated to quit his/her job and leave town. For this reason, Monsignor Landen refuses to baptize local Moroccans into the Catholic Church. He felt that while Christian Protestant Evangelicals talk about a growing "house church" movement in Morocco, the same was not true for the Catholic who must attend mass and catechism classes in an official Catholic church building in order to practice his/her faith. Monsignor Landen added that the open proselytizing of Protestant evangelicals in Morocco was hurting the Catholic Church because most Moroccans did not differentiate between the two Christian groups.

¶10. (C) The Archbishop felt that the GOM spoke often about practicing religious tolerance but did little to show support for other faiths. He suggested that the GOM could send official representatives to attend important events in the church such as Christmas and Easter Masses. However, since he has been the Archbishop in Morocco, this had never happened. He claimed that his personal cook was frequently asked by the local police to give them details about who comes to meet with him and what they discuss.

¶11. (C) The Archbishop showed deep concern about the family legal issues faced by Christians in Morocco and felt that the judicial system was weak in protecting the rights of

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individuals. He pointed out that internet-arranged marriages were a growing phenomenon, attracting many European men and women to find spouses among local residents. When these foreigners arrived in Morocco, many were surprised to learn that they must "convert" to Islam before the marriage could take place. Furthermore, any children born from the union must also be Muslim if they remained in the country. The Monsignor claimed the French Consulate in Morocco conducted 20,000 marriages last year for French citizens wishing to marry local Moroccans, and that one year later, 50 percent of these marriages had ended in divorce. He personally felt that most of these unions were simply a means for the Moroccan partner to obtain a French visa but when divorce occurred, lingering marriage and child custody issues remained for the expatriate which often went unresolved in the Moroccan judicial system. Archbishop Landen estimated there were presently 5,000 Muslim/Christian mixed marriage couples living in Morocco.

GOM Forbearance of Foreign Missionaries Being Tested

¶12. (C) According to Rev. Wald, there were roughly 150 American evangelical Christian missionaries serving throughout Morocco, and their numbers were growing. He stated that the GOM generally tolerated their presence as long as they were engaging in activities to benefit the country/society, not actively proselytizing, and did not pose

a threat to the monarchy. Wald opined that as the number of Moroccan Christian converts increases, so did the threat of Islamic militant activity.

¶13. (C) The Director of the American Language Center in Fes observed that the number of Christian missionaries in Fes and the mountain areas was increasing. He stated that the Moroccan culture should not be influenced by the missionaries; he feared it would lead to a security problem; and the Embassy should prevent American missionaries from evangelizing. He related that he had informed the Moroccan security services of his observations and concerns. He also noted his chagrin that missionaries have opened their own language school, and that missionary students, who had formerly enrolled in his school, now attend the new one run by missionaries.

¶14. (C) Rev. Wald claimed that tensions exist between short-term and long-term evangelical workers. The long-term workers are more discreet in their activities, tend to appreciate and value the local culture, and understand the sensitive issues that exist when introducing Christianity to a predominately Muslim culture. On the other hand, short-term evangelical workers are more overt in their actions, attract unwanted attention, and risk endangering themselves and those Moroccan citizens who may be receptive to their message.

¶15. (C/NF) David Hutton, an American missionary with the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, exemplifies the long-term missionary. He apprised PolOff and Cofsky that the IMB has many personnel in Morocco. Hutton said he was officially here to facilitate cultural and language exchanges for college-aged American students who are also sponsored by the IMB. Hutton was certain that the GOM knew the true identity and intentions of himself and other evangelical workers but believed that it was more concerned about much bigger issues. Hutton informed Cofsky and PolOff that he did not fear the government but that he and other IMB representatives were very discreet in their work and tried to respect cultural sensitivities. He stated that IMB representatives did not publicly proselytize but did respond to Moroccans who ask them questions about the Christian faith.

Visa Issues with Christian Missionary Workers

¶16. (C/NF) According to both Wald and Hutton, most evangelical Christian workers had no problem obtaining Moroccan visas. The only expatriate known to them in Morocco with an official "missionary" visa was operating an orphanage. Some of the many evangelical workers in Morocco had 10-year residency visas. Others had 3-month tourist visas but faced no difficulty getting them renewed. These missionaries were working in Morocco as English teachers, students of Arabic and Moroccan culture, social workers,

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tourist industry workers and pastors. Only rarely did these Christian expatriates face visa difficulties. Wald reported that an American pastor in Casablanca was facing some difficulty in obtaining his residency visa.

Jewish Moroccan Perspectives

¶17. (C) Jews in Casablanca, such as Boris Toledano, the leader of a Jewish community, stated that the Moroccan society generally treats Jews with tolerance, and credited the protection of the King. (Note: There are an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 Jews in Morocco, most of whom live in Casablanca. End note.) However, several mentioned that their existence had become unknown to the vast majority of

Morocco's citizenry, and stressed that the government needed to educate the populace about the country's Jewish heritage and current Jewish citizenry via television and school curricula. Mr. Cohen, Director of the Maimoni School, related that there was always a high demand among Muslim citizens to have their children enrolled in his school because of its known quality. He does not permit the percentage of Muslim students to exceed 50 percent in order to safeguard the school's "Jewish character." Dorit Benmoha, a graduate of the Maimoni School, praised the spirit of mutuality and friendship that characterized relationships between Jews and Muslims who attended the school but bemoaned the fact that such Muslim-Jewish relationships were not otherwise replicated in society.

118. (C) Jacques Sebag, Director of the Neveh Shalom School, related that Jews had the freedom to build synagogues, attend services and celebrate Jewish holidays. Nevertheless, he noted, two policemen were regularly posted at the entrance to synagogues and at Jewish monuments to provide protection. He also related that his assumption of societal tolerance was shattered when, in April 2002, a man wielding an axe struck him in the head. Drawing attention to a large jagged scar on his face and gruesome photos from the time of the attack, he stated his belief that the attacker assaulted him solely because his kippah (skull cap) identified him as a Jew. He believes that similar hatred seethes among a number of Moroccan Muslims. "We aren't safe to wear kippahs in the street," he said. "The message of tolerance must be given to the young."

Advice to the U.S. on Promoting
Tolerance and Religious Freedom

119. (C) Secretary General of Rabita Mohammedia of the Moroccan Ulema and former Director of Islamic Affairs at the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs Dr. Ahmed Abaddi told Cofsky and PolOff that the concept of having an Office of International Religious Freedom in the U.S. Department of State was a very "beautiful" thing. However, Abaddi asserted that the IRF report was perceived as a tool of pressure that sends the message, "I am making you come to where I am; otherwise, I will punish you." Abaddi suggested that the addition of a brief preface that explained the aims of the report would go a long way toward removing the impression that the U.S. had failed to understand the viewpoints of its audience.

120. (C) Abaddi asserted that the restoration of the positive image of, and love for, the United States in the region was a goal that was well within the U.S.'s reach. For example, he advised that the U.S. sponsor competitions and offer prizes in the domain of the arts, such as poetry, fine arts, music, novels and especially movies for works that best promote religious freedom and tolerance. He said that open dialogue and having Christians, Jews, and Muslims work on projects together were key to improving interfaith relations.

121. (C) In a meeting at the Ministry of Interior, Governor, Migration Director and general America-watcher Khalid Zerouali told Cofsky and PolOff that the IRF report was perceived to be a product of the evangelical movement in America. In order to have more credibility, Zerouali suggested that more people of the Islamic faith work in the Office of Religious Freedom.

122. (C) Zerouali opined that Morocco's King Mohammed VI is the "Commander of the Faithful" referring to people of all faiths: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. He pointed out that

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Morocco did not wait until after September 11 to show religious tolerance. Rather, Zerouali claimed, Morocco is a melting pot of religions, sharing how Morocco protected the

Jewish community during World War II.

¶23. (C) Governor Zerouali suggested that the United States give Morocco more encouragement in its efforts to promote religious tolerance. He said that Morocco could be used to promote the model of "protector of believers" to other countries in the region. Round table religious tolerance discussions featuring sponsored Moroccans, promoting the Moroccan imam training model and scholar exchanges between universities, were possible considerations.

¶24. (C) According to Dr. Mohsine Elahmadi, a Cadi Ayyad University Political Science Professor and specialist concerning Islamic extremism who is based in Marrakech, religious tolerance in Morocco is a societal, not a political problem, and reaching Moroccan youth during their early education years is critical to making a difference. Elahmadi suggested that the USG provide discreet support (not publicly attributed as coming from the United States) for the King to make changes from within and that efforts in the fields of education and the arts could assist the monarchy in its desire to slowly introduce a more moderate Islam to Morocco.

¶25. (C) Elahmadi shared that historically, Islam and Morocco were very tolerant of other religions and lamented that both should return to their roots. He suggested that the USG fund a network of moderate Islamic authorities, such as Dr. Abaddi, to promote their views and teachings from the Koran. Elahmadi offered to conduct a study on Moroccan youth and their religious beliefs if the USG would provide the required USD 100,000.

¶26. (C) Cofsky and PolOff had the opportunity to meet with several faculty members of the prestigious Dar Al Hadith Al Hassania University in Rabat, known for its teachings of a more moderate Islam and promoting the role of women as mourchidat (female Muslim clerics). Students here study all disciplines including logic, philosophy, Hebrew, French, religious studies, psychology, sociology and law. University Deputy Director Khalid Saqui explained how those who studied at Dar Al Hadith Al Hassania left the university with an openness to all ideas, faiths, and religions. He welcomed the opportunity to participate in more cultural exchanges with the United States, focusing more on the intellectual level and less on political discourse. Saqui suggested that it might be possible for the University to partner with the USG via intellectual discussions on themes such as "Differences and Pluralism" or "Can We Live Together Whether We Are Alike or Different?"

Department Encourages Muslim Scholars
To Exert Their Positive Influence

¶27. (C) In meetings with Muslim leaders and professors of Islam, Cofsky explained the purpose and role of the IRF Office and encouraged them to use their influence to promote tolerance and co-existence with non-Muslims, including internationally. These meetings included Dr. Abdellah Macer, Chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Sidi Muhammad bin Abdellah in Fes; Dr. Abdelhay Ammor, Director of the Ulema Council of Fes; Mr. Hassan Taleb, member of the Scientific Council of Ulemas and co-presenter of a religious program on television; Dr. Abdellah Cherif Ouazzani, President of the Moulay Abdellah Cherif Foundation for Scientific Study and Research; and Ms. Fatema Sadiqi, University Professor and Director of the Fes Festival of Sacred Music.

Comment

¶28. (C) Morocco has a legacy of religious tolerance and enjoys more religious freedom than many countries of the region, but there is still much work to do. During Cofsky's visit we heard repeatedly from leaders of all faiths that

they truly believe that the GOM wants to do more to promote religious tolerance, but the real push-back seems to come from society in general and threats from Islamic extremists. The Mission feels that more efforts to promote religious dialogue and round table discussions among people of different faiths could be a positive step forward. End

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comment.

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Jackson